

A LETTER ON THE FRENCH PICTURES

By

RAYMOND MORTIMER



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THE FRENCH PICTURES
A LETTER TO HARRIET

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DEAREST HARRIET,

I loved my week in the country. You were evidently designed to be a hostess, from the days when you used to invite me to your house (a tent-shaped willow-tree) and give me ginger-nuts and pour out tea, which was water from the garden-tap with bull's-eyes in it that obstinately refused to melt. Thank you and Tom for everything, including the weather, which you must have ordered with all the other good things from Fortnum's, and remember that Dick is to come to a play with me next holidays. He promised.

I didn't read my novel in the train, though it was by Miss Dorothy Sayers. I thought instead about your last shouted words, as the train coughed its way out of the station: "Then we'll see you after Christmas when we come up for the Exhibition." And all the way up to Paddington I was wondering—you've never minded what I said since we quarrelled on the respective merits of my Swiss nurse and your English Nanny—I was wondering what pleasure on earth you expected to get from walking round thirteen gloomy rooms hung with French pictures. There will be

thousands of people making the same weary promenade, and museums are not made less depressing by being crowded. Will you get any satisfaction save that of having done what it is thought right and desirable to do, of being able to make a little conversation on the subject with Dr. O'Flaherty's wife next time you see her? Won't you just struggle back very much exhausted, and go on with your ordinary life as if you had been to the Eton and Harrow Match or Eleven o'clock Service?

Now I'd like you to get a kick out of the Show, such a kick that you'd leave Burlington House a changed person, or rather with changed eyes, like a motorist suddenly converted by dropping into your village church one morning (if you can imagine anyone being converted by Matins and Mr. Cumberbatch's preaching) and at once setting fire to his motor and becoming a saint. I'd like you, I mean, to walk out of the Exhibition and wander along the streets for hours, forgetting all your engagements, simply drunk with the pleasure of using your eyes, gloating over the flopping of the flags in Bond Street, and the green ivory knives in the old silver shops, and the stream-line motors, and the pillars of St. Martin's Church, smirched by the soot on the lee side, and the wrinkles on the beggars, and the haze which

makes Whitehall from the St. James's Park lake look like the pleasure domes of Xanadu. And in the evening at the theatre you'd be astonished by the shape of the 'cellos and fiddles as if you had never seen one before, and you'd refuse to take a taxi back to Dover Street, in spite of the rain, for the pleasure of seeing the sky-signs reflected in the wet streets and in the glass of the shop-windows. And back at home the next afternoon even your beloved garden would look different and a thousand times more exciting, perspective playing the oddest tricks with the shape of your clipped hedges, the bare boughs of the elms beyond the tennis-court making a formal pattern, and—is it possible—the yawning space where one yew has died in the avenue you planted, showing itself as a heaven-sent balance to the giant poplar. For a moment, in fact, the new pleasure would prove stronger than your gardening pride.

Actually of course, when you leave the French Exhibition, you will collapse into a chair at Stewart's, ask for "a fresh pot of China Tea," and, being a peculiarly honest woman, thank Heaven that *that's* over. You enjoy music (you sing Schubert admirably and you know it), and I've never known you taken in by a second-rate book. You were highly indignant when they ran a line of pylons across the moor (I'm not so sure that I

thousands of people making the same weary promenade, and museums are not made less depressing by being crowded. Will you get any satisfaction save that of having done what it is thought right and desirable to do, of being able to make a little conversation on the subject with Dr. O'Flaherty's wife next time you see her? Won't you just struggle back very much exhausted, and go on with your ordinary life as if you had been to the Eton and Harrow Match or Eleven o'clock Service?

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agree with you about that, but certainly you were very sincere in finding them detestable). And you arrange to admiration the colours in your herbaceous borders. Finally, there is nothing ugly in your house. Yet you don't use your eyes, I maintain. And if there is nothing ugly in your house, it is because there is nothing (except the baths) made since 1830. "Harriet has such marvellous taste," your friends say, but your taste, where sight is concerned, is merely negative. You would have the sense not to have an Orpen in your room, but still less would you have a Matisse. You don't see much to choose between a Gainsborough and a Romney, except that the clothes are a little different, and at the French Exhibition you will like Pater as much as Watteau. Don't they both paint the same prettily dressed people in the same charming parks?

Use your eyes, Harriet, use your eyes.

But, I wondered, looking at the spire as the train drew into Salisbury, and thinking of Constable, but how can I persuade her to? One learns to use one's eyes, one can't be taught. For the understanding of French painting it is useful to know about François 1^{er} and Port Royal and Madame de Pompadour and the Romantic Movement and the Goncourts. And all this you do know. But when you go to Burlington House, I would like you for

an hour to forget all your history. You might catch hold of what I want you to get, if you could look at the pictures as if they were outside time. Imagine, I mean, that all these painters are alive, each working independently to make the object he desires. Otherwise you'll find yourself looking for influences instead of looking at pictures; you will recognise a period or school, and miss the individual; you will use your intelligence upon the things described, and you will not use your senses upon the paint that describes them.

Don't be frightened: I'm not going to give you a lecture on æsthetics. Other people have done that far better than I could. (If you haven't read Clive Bell and Roger Fry, do so at once.) I'll only say this: the subject of a picture is often interesting and sometimes important. But what really matters is the object, the picture itself. And that is why I want you, at any rate the first time you go to the Exhibition, to forget everything you ever heard about French history or French painters, and to look at the paintings as a child might—"Aren't those pretty colours?", "What a funny shape!". The first feeling I want you to have is surprise. If you could get that, the rest might so easily follow.

You know how completely habit blinds us. If we do a thing very often, we cease to be conscious

of doing it. You are so familiar yourself with the profile of the moor on the horizon, that you don't now notice it, save when some strange light touches it, or when a stranger starts to gush. In the same way you are blinded by familiarity to the appearance of forks and kodaks and apples and egg cups. A painter never is. He goes on being surprised. He is a man who can see objects divorced for the moment from their purpose, origin, and meaning. He sees like a man blind from birth who suddenly recovers his sight. It would be the most thrilling experience to spend one day seeing the world as Claude or Renoir saw it. If you are really to enjoy pictures, you too must somehow shake your blinkers off.

When you visit the French Exhibition, I'd like you to go straight to the Nineteenth Century Rooms. If the pictures here don't surprise you, you are lost indeed. They are not only good, very good, some of them I think as good as any pictures ever painted, but they are probably less familiar to you than the older masters. (Our Christmas card manufacturers have not yet started using Manets and Cézannes.) Moreover, in Nineteenth Century France, painters were more excited than ever before by the mere look of things. They gazed wide-eyed at commonplace buildings, at newspapers, at tall hats, just as I want you to gaze at

pictures. Catch their astonishment, as you might catch the measles, and then you will be able to see, but really to see, the Watteaus and Chardins and Bouchers.

Now let's pretend, Harriet, as we used to when we played Red Indians, let's pretend that you've caught the infection, got back the use of your eyes. Like the child in Hans Andersen, you see the Emperor without his new clothes, you see his body, what a surprising, complicated shape it is. The next point is to discover which shapes you enjoy. And once your eyes are open, I don't think you should find this very difficult. You like your Heppelwhite chairs, and you've banished the rose-wood furniture that your mother bought when she married—fifty years ago, wasn't it?—at Maple's. Pictures are not so very different from chairs: you prefer your Heppelwhite, not because it does its job any better—the Maple chairs are just as solid and just as comfortable—but because it is more beautiful. The lines are more graceful. You recognise in fact that it is better designed. In the same way when you look at chintzes for new curtains or loose covers, there are a lot of stuffs which are equally durable, and you finally decide on one because you think that in line and colour it is the best design.

Have you ever looked at pictures as if they were samples of stuff? I don't suppose you have, but that is just what I want you to do. For every picture is a pattern, every good picture, I mean, and the beauty of a picture depends more than you have ever dreamed upon its merit as a pattern. Of course in a picture it is far less obvious and immensely more complicated than in a chintz. But if you look at the large Bouchers in the Wallace Collection, for instance, or at any of the more decorative seventeenth and eighteenth century pictures in the Exhibition, you will be able clearly to detect the pattern. The French inherited from renaissance Italy a certain tradition of design which they developed but did not abandon till about the end of the eighteenth century. This was not a recipe for making good pictures—there ain't no sich thing—but it usually prevented them from making very ugly things, either pictures or buildings or stuffs. Certain simple rules were observed, the pattern balanced. It was left to the bad painters of the nineteenth century to make pictures with no more shape than casual snapshots, pictures in which the lines and colours represented places or persons and had no harmony of their own.

This matter of design or composition is difficult to write about but it is of enormous importance in

French painting, in all painting for that matter. You have read Racine and Baudelaire, some Voltaire and a little Renan. I take the most divergent individuals, but how thoughtfully planned is the writing of them all, how elegantly constructed. It's the same with French pictures. You'll understand best what I mean by looking at the Poussins. And when I say "looking" I mean it. The first secret of enjoying pictures is to have a good long stare. In face of one which you like or which you believe to be good, you must try to do your bit as enthusiastically as the painter did his. All art is a collaboration between the artist and his audience, he is sending you messages, so that you must keep your eyes open, as you do for your partner's discards at bridge, and use your imagination to reconstruct what is going on in his mind. It is fatal to be passive, and to take it for granted that a picture is what it is. Ask yourself why the painter made it like that; why he placed the principal figure so far to the left of the centre, what the large round pot is doing in the right-hand corner, why the floating scarf is just the colour that it is. The figure bending down in the background certainly doesn't contribute anything to the "story" of Actæon—ask yourself why it is there, and soon you'll see it is essential to the pattern. Sometimes you'll be stumped, but once

you start asking such questions, you'll find pictures twenty times more interesting.

And with no pictures is the answer so easy as with Poussin's. He was the most deliberate of all the Old Masters, he left nothing to chance. He bent one figure forward, another back, stretched a satyr's leg exactly parallel with a recumbent column, balanced an arched back with a semi-circular drapery, and froze a kneeling nymph into a right-angled triangle. At first sight you might easily think his pictures dull. The female figures are rarely the type we now find attractive, their postures are anything but spontaneous, and it is often difficult to see his sumptuous colours. (The pictures in the Louvre are for the most part covered, like *boeuf à la mode*, with dark brown jelly.) But once you see what the artist was up to, he is as exciting as Palladio or Bach. Of course geometry is not enough. Learning all Boileau by heart would not enable a man to write one couplet of "Phèdre." Poussin is a grand master to study because the framework of his pictures is always so powerful and clear. But it is the working out which matters, a conglomeration of touches which words are quite incapable of defining.

Incidentally that is what makes writing about pictures so futile. What painting says, can be said only in paint. Writing about Poussin is like play-

ing the piano about Milton. But I'm enjoying writing to you, so I'd better not dwell upon that.

I've suggested that you should look at the Impressionists to catch their sense of what a surprising place the world is. I've suggested that you should look at the Bouchers, and still more at the Poussins, to get yourself interested in the way a picture is composed. (It's the greatest folly to try to look at very many pictures at one go. I advise you never to spend more than an hour at a time in a museum.) Now I want you to look at the Chardins and Courbets, so that you may recognise what the French call "*la belle matière*," the quality or texture of paint. This is the most difficult of all pictorial virtues to describe in words, its appeal is entirely sensuous. To get hold of what I mean, you must forget what the picture represents, you must almost rub your nose against the paint as if it were a beautiful fur or something good to eat. Have you ever noticed the beauty of a Brie cheese, with its brown and white rind? I think this is more like really rich paint than anything else in our ordinary life. The red mottlings on the dry russet of a Cox's Orange Pippin have again something of the same beauty. But it is difficult to find an analogy in other materials, because what one likes in any material is largely its peculiarity, the thing about it, I

mean, which makes it different from other materials, the sponginess of the sponge, the velvetiness of velvet. Horsehair, shantung, American cloth, crocodile-skin, each of them has its own peculiar character. So has the material of which a picture is made, oil paint. But whether its character is pleasant or unpleasant depends upon the way it is applied. The varying thickness of the paint, the lines made by the brush hairs, the multiplicity of colour hidden in what at a distance seems a uniform smear—all this contributes to the quality and texture. Compare a Chardin Still Life (seen from very close) with a Dutch one, or a Courbet with a Raeburn—you can't miss the difference. Another instance. You may know Sargent's "Carnation, Lily, Lily Rose" in the Tate. (Wasn't it Whistler who re-christened it "Darnation Silly, Silly Pose"?) It is an astonishing piece of conjuring. From a distance of a few yards, it seems a most detailed piece of realistic painting. Look into it, and the petals that seem so carefully outlined are just smudges of colour. The same is true of many Impressionist pictures. But—and this is my point—in Renoir or Sisley the smudges are pleasant in themselves, apart from the effect which they coalesce to make at a distance. In the Sargent the smudges are thoroughly unpleasant. I particularly want you to

catch on to this, for texture is not only intensely enjoyable but a great test. You can tell a Watteau or a Guardi from an imitation by one of their followers instantly by just this quality. Similarly this explains why the best coloured reproductions of oil paintings are so unlike their originals. To get them right you'd need to make a cast of the picture's surface, like a relief map. Moreover this love of paint for paint's sake has become increasingly important in each century. Fresco does not give the same opportunity for richness of texture as oil, and similarly oil as used by the Primitives is less rewarding than it is in later pictures. Titian and Rembrandt in their old age managed miracles of texture, and Rubens at his best is sumptuous. But nowhere will you find greater richness than in the French painters, Chardin, Corot, Courbet, Renoir, Cézanne.

At this point, Harriet, you will say "And what about Ingres?": at least, I hope you will. Probably the most unpopular of all great painters is Rubens, in fact you can tell whether a person really cares for painting by asking him his feelings about Rubens. It's all because he liked the women he painted to be fat. I've no doubt he also liked the women he loved to be fat. It's a great mistake, I fancy, and a modern invention for a painter to concentrate on models which he

does not find humanly attractive. Somebody said you ought to paint a door-knob as if it were a girl. A lot of our most respectable contemporaries paint girls as if they were door-knobs. (I have not noticed this Puritanism in the Old Masters.) Anyhow, since the sixteenth century the fashion in figures has changed, and as a result the Man in the Street hates Rubens. But once forget about figures, and you must love Rubens, the dash of his designs, the sunset splendour of his colour, his witchcraft in the use of paint. Monsieur Ingres is a very different kettle. He really is difficult to enjoy. "Dreary colours," you say, "and a surface like a chromotype." In fact you think his texture horrible. (I feel encouraged. You have evidently been looking at the Chardins and Courbets as I asked you to.) It very often is horrible. He draws like an angel, like Picasso, like Raphael, but that is not the point. I'd like to suggest that there can be a beauty in smooth paint as well as in rough, though I agree that it is a lot harder to get the hang of it. Ingres has it in his best work, Botticelli had it, so I think did Petrus Christus. I'll agree that his theories were a horrid handicap to Ingres. But with one hand tied behind his back he did better than almost anyone with both hands free. He is an odd instance of a reactionary genius. Freedom of handling had been growing in the

eighteenth century: Fragonard, following Rubens, developed something very like Impressionism. Ingres, like Metternich, tried to stop the flood, and, like Mrs. Partington, he failed. Later the Pre-Raphaelites in England tried, with infinitely less talent, to do the same thing. The history of nineteenth-century painting is the history of ever growing freedom.

There are still people who believe that freedom of handling is a sign of incompetence. "Why don't they finish their pictures?" is a question you will probably hear some dear old lady asking in front of the Impressionists. And her companion will no doubt answer, "Because they can't." And then they will both trot back to admire the Clouets, which they feel, not altogether wrongly, are more like dear Sir John Millais's works. In point of fact the Impressionists painted as they did because they were intensely anxious to represent the visible world. And it is only by the Impressionist technique that the appearance of things can be at all truthfully rendered. Monet's picture of the Gare St. Lazare is far more like the appearance of a railway station than Frith's "Paddington." The Impressionists, you see, were careful not to state all the facts, because they knew that when we look at a person or a street, we do not perceive all the facts. It is only when we focus

on a small part of the person or the street that we can see that part in detail. No one has ever seen a figure as Madox Brown or Burne Jones painted it. Frith's "Derby Day" represents not what he could see at one moment, but a recapitulation of the various things he saw at a number of different moments. The Impressionists, on the other hand, painted what their eyes with no alteration of focus could perceive. If representation be the main object of the painter, they win all along the line. The odd thing is that it is just the people (for instance the two old ladies) who think pictures ought above all things to be "like," who also have most attacked the Impressionists. It was indeed to make their pictures "like," that they carried freedom of handling further than it had ever been carried, except by Turner. The best Impressionists, however, were good painters, not because of their skill in representation, but because they had the artist's instinct for rhythm and order. Even so they were often dangerously over-interested in putting down on canvas exactly what they saw. Like Turner, they toppled over into anarchy. A recall to order became necessary. The man who made it was Cézanne.

It's rather bad manners to say "I told you so." But for those of us who can remember the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, the French Show

has a special spiteful charm. Do you remember the Van Gogh reproductions I had in my rooms at Oxford in 1913? You were almost the only person who wasn't rude about them. The Primrose League Dames do not regard Lenin with greater horror than the Royal Academicians have regarded Cézanne. And now instead of hanging him, they have got to hang his pictures. Most of them, it is true, have a hearty and rational dislike of the Old Masters, and I take leave to doubt whether the President can tell the difference between a Giorgione and a Guido Reni. But they have made vast sums by letting their premises for the Dutch and Persian and Italian Exhibitions, and this time I presume they will make even more, as instead of getting a fat rent they are running the show themselves and getting a share in the profits. It's a scandal that they are given one of the most expensive sites in London rent-free, but at least they have to pay for it out of their self-respect. They now have to sponsor Cézanne. I can imagine no greater humiliation.

You won't find it difficult to appreciate Cézanne. His design is as solid as Poussin's, his texture is as rich as any a painter ever achieved. He had little success in his life, because he lived at a time when even the best painters were supremely interested in representation. His aim was to apply the freedom

in the use of paint which the Impressionists had developed to compositions arranged in the tradition of the Old Masters. He achieved his aim, and has now taken his place among the chief glories of European painting. His influence has been prodigious, like Masaccio's: except for one or two septuagenarians, I doubt if there is a good painter alive who has not been affected by him. And one reason why I am so keen for you to start liking pictures is that painting to-day is the healthiest of the arts. It is important not to draw all one's pleasure from the past: to do so is to begin that retreat from reality which ends in madness. Now there is no poet alive, I think, who can reasonably be placed with the very great, with Pope or Wordsworth or Baudelaire. Nor have we a novelist of Balzac's stature, or Tolstoy's or Proust's. And in music also there seems to be a mass of talent but precious little genius. Architecture at last is stirring from sleep, but the best of our architects are still in that protestant mood which distrusts pleasure. But painting is alive, certain of itself, and full of gusto. You can't give artists marks as if they were prize cattle or candidates for the Indian Civil. But unless all the hours I have spent looking at pictures have been wasted, Picasso is a really big man—you could put his work in any room in any museum in the world

without dwarfing it. And Matisse is a greater colourist than any Venetian. And Braque in his way is just as good as Chardin was in his. And in England we have never before had such a good decorative painter as Duncan Grant. So if at the French Show you catch on to what painting is about, you will find the modern world a much more respectable place.

I'd like therefore to talk about the peculiarity which makes contemporary painting difficult for some people to enjoy. It's a peculiarity which you can see beginning in the nineteenth-century pictures. You'll notice that the painters began then to be less explicit. Even those Impressionists who were so fascinated by the look of the world, and who developed such an unequalled technique for representing it, were forced in their pursuit of realism, to imply rather than to state. Light does not usually reveal the whole of an object. It makes part of it very clear, and shrouds the rest. And these Frenchmen with their passion for light, did the same thing. And in doing so, they incidentally hit upon a psychological truth: they discovered that other people beside themselves had imagination and liked to use it. The worst bore in the world is the man who in telling you a story spares you nothing, gives every detail equal importance. (I am still suffering from the Sahib you asked to

dinner who took twenty minutes and four glasses of port to tell me one anecdote about pig-sticking.) The painters, then, started to throw out hints, which it was our business, our pleasure, to pick up. (The writers of the time were experimenting in the same method, for the intelligent public was beginning to find long-windedness boring.) Painting ceased to be explicit. Daumier quite early in the century, Constantin Guys and later Toulouse-Lautrec, drew incisively, but drew only what it was necessary to draw. They deliberately left a lot to the imagination.

This telegraphic method has now been pushed pretty well to its limits: the best modern painters, and writers too, incline to leave so much to the imagination that their work is incomprehensible to most people. Still it is extraordinary how the man in the street is getting his eye trained. Half the posters now in the street would have seemed unintelligible, I fancy, twenty years ago. The best athletes, we are told, are those that make the fewest unnecessary movements. Similarly there is added force in the concision of a phrase, the economy of a single line, whether written or drawn.

Side by side with this distrust of the explicit has come an increased concentration on pattern or design, a desire above all things for rhythm and order. And in pursuit of this painters have grown

more and more ruthless in their treatment of natural appearances. Distortion has always been a part of the painter's traditional method; Ingres, for instance, was howled at for his distortions just as modern painters and sculptors are. And when our Academicians assume that distortion is an offence, they are only advertising their own ignorance. They have evidently either never looked at or never appreciated Chartres or Ravenna, Oriental painting, or Greek sculpture before Phidias. This brings me back to the wretched question of representation. (How I hate the word.) How important is it? Making up your mind on the point will not help you to enjoy pictures, Harriet, and anyhow, you'll probably change your mind the next day. All that matters is that you should not refuse to enjoy a picture because it fails to represent accurately anything in nature; or, for that matter, because it represents it too accurately. I'll only say two things. Firstly carpets and cubist pictures which represent nothing, can undoubtedly be beautiful. Secondly, most great painters, even those most free in their use of distortion, have been acutely interested in representation. If you conclude that representation is not essential to visual art, but is usually important in it, you won't, I think, be dangerously wrong.

It is very easy to say that the subject of a picture is of no importance. But I doubt if it is very true. Of course a painting by Chardin of a bottle and a loaf is finer than a painting of the Muses by Le Brun; of course a flayed ox by Rembrandt is better than an unflayed woman by Madame Vigée-Lebrun.

*D'un pinceau délicat l'artifice agréable
Du plus affreux objet fait un objet aimable.*

Of course some of the worst pictures ever painted are as it were anecdotes in paint. (And like so many anecdotes, they are intensely boring. There is nothing interesting that I can see in Cardinals drinking the Cook's health, or in a doctor sitting by a child's bedside.) But if the painter has a very different aim from the historian and the novelist, he really is rather like the poet. Schoolmasters and clergymen may like Shakespeare for the moral platitudes in which his characters too frequently indulge. But the point of Shakespeare is not in the truths he states but in the way he states them, the imagery and the diction. All good pictures are painted as it were in verse. I think you get a better notion of what painters are up to by thinking of the poets than by reading all the lives of all the painters. A picture has its origin in facts, in a

stone bridge, a girl drinking absinthe, or a model standing in an uncomfortable position in a room with a north light. But painting is not mere description any more than nature-poetry is geology or botany. To take another analogy, a painter "sets" natural appearances, rather as a composer sets a text, he creates a new object which retains a relationship to the object which caught his attention. All good pictures are painted as it were to a melody.

And once you have got interested in the way pictures are made, you'll find, oddly enough, an increased fascination in what they represent. A picture of a wood is not interesting because it is like a wood, but because of the way the painter has seen the wood, and the way he has made a picture out of his vision. Every good painter, though he may think himself a realist, represents the world of his individual imagination. It is easy and frequent to write bad poetry or paint bad pictures on the subject of marble palaces on a sea-shore in the sunset. But Baudelaire infects us with his own nostalgia when he finds in a woman's hair

un éblouissant rêve

De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts:

Un port retentissant où mon âme peut boire

A grands flots le parfum, le son et la couleur;

*Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l'or et dans la moire,
Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire
D'un ciel pur où fremit l'éternelle chaleur.*

And Claude produced the equivalent in paint when he invented his "*vastes portiques que les soleils marins teignaient de mille feux.*" The subject is important not in itself, but because it excites the artist. A plate of apples could throw Cézanne into the ecstasy which Claude found in trees, rigging, columns and the sky; and he would make of it a Still Life which in its rightness and solidity seems to be more enduring than bronze. All great painting in fact stimulates through our sensations an exaltation of mind. The range of method is enormous, and the exaltation may be tinged with melancholy, desire, or even amusement. But the artist is equally a man of imagination, whether he turns his vision on the actual or the fabulous world. The silvery groups of solid peasants shown us by Le Nain, the jockeys of Degas, Seurat's woman powdering her face, Géricault's lunatics, Manet's barmaids, Chardin's housewives and the dignitaries of Ingres belong to the same world as Poussin's satyrs, and Watteau's gallants. It is a world as various as that we inhabit, but where everything is significant, rhythmical, inevitable and right.

Indeed once you are familiar with pictures, you will often see the world with something approaching a painter's eye. Plain walls will take on a new interest, because you will find in them reflections of Corot: Courbet and Pissarro will have taught you the colour and influence of snow: sand will become translucent, as in Seurat, and the tree-trunks will echo the grave melodies of Cézanne. You will in fact find in the actual world images of the painters' ideal world.

So don't imagine that I want you to go to Burlington House with this letter in one hand, and the catalogue in the other, giving this painter nine for texture, and that one zero for composition. And above all, Harriet, don't be frightened by prigs like me. If you take to a picture because the girl in it has a pretty neck or an amusing hat, you are perfectly right. The painter no doubt liked the neck or the hat, and you have caught his signal. There are a hundred reasons for enjoying pictures, and they are all of them good. How can there ever be too much enjoyment—that's why I want you to open your eyes. Don't complain because Boucher is not like Cézanne, or because Ingres is not like Corot. Keep an open mind as well as an open eye. Then you may find, at the age of thirty-five, isn't it, a whole new world of pleasure unfolding itself before your enraptured gaze.

But perhaps not, Harriet. Perhaps you had better not look too closely. Politicians and admirals, speaking at Academy Banquets, often talk about art as a harmless and indeed commendable recreation from the important affairs of life, something to kill time with when it is too wet to play golf, a sort of refined Lady Companion with unimpeachable references and a talent for parlour games. Art is not like that. It is much more like a tiger. And if your eyes were once opened to these pictures, you would find in them not an escape from reality, but an escape into reality, and then you would be in deadly danger. There is no telling what you might do. Your husband, your son, all your well ordered life, might dwindle into phantoms, and I see you leaving them all behind, not cruelly but just forgetful, taking passage on the first ship that turns up, bound for Martinique or Newcastle, you don't care which, living by your senses and in your mind, living in the moment and for the moment upon the "terrestrial nourishments." Perhaps you had better keep away from the French pictures, Harriet, and then for certain I shall be able to come again and admire the magnolia, listen to the lawn-mower, eat drop-scones with Devonshire cream, bathe in the pool with Dick, chatter to you about the past, and enjoy once more the

perfect hospitality for which I have tried to thank you with what must be the longest Collins that ever man wrote.

Love, lots of it, from

Your affectionate

R.

P.S.—I stupidly left behind a dressing-gown and a novel called *Men and Wives*. Please be an angel, send me the former, and read the latter, as a reward.

HIS